by Master Sgt. Lance Cheung

When scores of his co-workers deployed, *civilian transportation worker Victor Young had a lot more work to do. It was tough duty, and some of his co-workers balked. But not Mr. Young. "Actually, I enjoyed it," he said. "It expanded my work knowledge, which helps for promotion."*

Picking Up the Slack

Double duty and stress is the norm when co-workers deploy

by Louis A. Arana-Barradas

When Senior Airman Judy Montesdeoca deployed to Iraq, she found out how vital her job was to the U.S. effort.

She didn't build or load bombs on fighter jets. She didn't patrol the base perimeter to repel insurgents. She didn't protect convoys. And she didn't go on combat search and rescue missions.

But as a supply specialist, she learned her profession was just as critical to the coalition mission in Iraq. Because she researched, ordered, tracked, received, logged and delivered the items other Airmen needed to do their jobs. It was hard work, and an often thankless, around-the-clock task.

However, while working those 12- to 14-hour days, she learned something else.

"'Down range,' you depend on people back home to provide you the things you need to get the job done," said the Airman from the 37th Logistics Readiness Squadron, Lackland Air Force Base, Texas. "Because when a plane breaks, you need the repair part now, not later."

Airman Montesdeoca, of Long Beach, Calif., returned to Lackland. Gone was the stress of being in a war zone far from her daughter. Glad to be home, she settled into a normal work mode.

Then, overnight, half her co-workers deployed. Just like that, the Airman's workload doubled. She had no choice but to pick up the pace. It didn't bother her, though. Because after serving on both ends of the supply chain she knew the importance of her stateside job.

"The work wasn't anything new, so I just dealt with it," she said. "I did what I had to do."

Airman Montesdeoca didn't have much choice, of course. But she's not alone. Doing the same work with less people isn't a new scenario. The service has thousands of troops deployed to operations around the world. That's the nature of business in today's Air Force.

Last summer, Gen. John Jumper, Air Force chief of staff, made it clear all Airmen are "expeditionary" and deployable. So Airmen who'd never deployed before soon found themselves on the front lines. Today, on average, there are from 19,000 to 21,000 Airmen deployed somewhere in the world at any given time, Air and Space Expeditionary Forces Center officials said. About 80 percent of them serve standard 120-day tours, but some 20 percent may serve longer, they said.

Needless to say, rotational air expeditionary force deployments leave stateside bases — and Airmen — short-handed. The impact varies and some bases feel it more than others. Some must cut services, or provide them by appointment. At others, some tasks are put on hold or left undone and some must ask for help from the Guard or Reserve, even contract new workers.

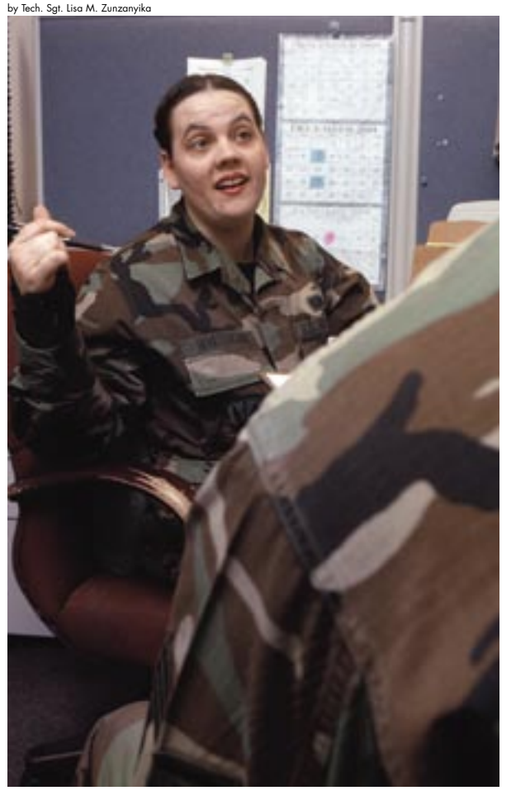
All the while, workers — like Airman 1st Class Grady Miller — must still meet base mission needs. A traffic management troop with the 3rd Logistics Readiness Squadron, Elmendorf Air Force Base, Alaska, he's never deployed. But he knows his at-home role well.

"People deploy to do important things, so it's up to us back home to get the job done," he said. That means long hours. However, the Airman from Chicago doesn't fret about the 14-hour days.

"We're part of a team, so it's up to us to pick up the slack," he said. "It's just part of the job."

Staff Sgt. Vereity Whitehorn said her work section circled the wagons *and prepared for long work days when co-workers deployed. But after an initial spike in workload, things eased up. People from other sections pitched in to help, and she said, "We were able to adjust very well."*

by Tech. Sgt. Lisa M. Zunzanyika



No relief in sight

There's definitely lots of work to do on the home front. But there's little relief in sight for them, said Col. Phil Bradley, deputy commander of the 305th Mission Support Group. His unit supports the always-deployed 305th Air Mobility Wing at McGuire Air Force Base, N.J.

It's no revelation the Air Force has been doing its job with fewer people for a long time, the colonel said. It has become cliché — the norm — a way of life. Someone must still get the job done, he said. The key to successfully getting it done is to prioritize.

"Obviously, we must take care of urgent things first," the colonel said. "So some jobs will just have to wait. Additionally, we still have to train people to ensure they're ready to deploy."

Sometimes getting the job done can become a juggling act. So the onus is on commanders to help decide what's done first. Putting things aside must be the last measure. It's vital to do everything possible before doing something that may affect customers, he said. Besides, the consequences aren't good. Spending efforts to get only the urgent jobs done doesn't allow for any long-range planning.

"Then everything becomes an emergency," he said. That's not good. Because working only to "put out the fires" doesn't allow for assessing and fixing problems.

Therefore, to make ends meet takes creative leadership. To keep up with demand, some McGuire troops work "Panama shifts." They work 12 to 14 hours several days in a row and then get a couple days off, the colonel said. On average, the workweek for base Airmen has increased from 40 to 50 hours per week since the start of the war on terrorism, he said. To add to the work, and stress load, McGuire is also bedding down a C-17 Globemaster III unit.

"But we're still getting the job done," Colonel Bradley said.

The consequences

This means keeping pace with the demands of a busier-than-ever Air Force and its global mission. Maintaining that presence takes more work at home and abroad. Air Force leaders admit the high work demand results in stressed out troops.

"Our jobs are inherently stressful. This is a fact of our profession," General Jumper stated in his October 2004 Chief's Sight Picture [http://www.af.mil/media/viewpoints/wingman.html]. As a result, "those at home face increased work hours, inconsistent manning and a continuous workload."

And, "lately, stress has been taking its toll on our Airmen," he said. The result: a "skyrocketing" suicide rate and a more than one-third rise in accidents.

"We're causing ourselves more harm than the enemy," General Jumper said.

The Air Force, however, cannot relieve the deployment tempo, he said. To help solve the problems, the service is beefing up suicide prevention measures. It's telling Airmen to keep an eye on each other to ward off potential problems.

"That's why everyone has a wingman," said Maj. John Dorrian, McGuire's 305th Mission Support Squadron commander. A wingman keeps an eye on his buddy and works to rid workplaces of stressors. They look for warning signs that somebody is depressed or having trouble coping and they're encouraged to intervene at the first sign of trouble, the major said.

"There's nothing that takes stress off you like knowing somebody else will look out for you," said Major Dorrian, of Jacksonville, Fla. He added that though commanders at all levels work hard to mitigate stressors, they'll never do away with them. Sometimes the stress is too much.

At Lackland's transportation section, for example, civilian Victor Young said 18 co-workers deployed one day. The stress level rose dramatically. The heavy equipment operator from El Paso, Texas, said some people had to vent. But like Young — a former Airman — most "hung in there" and did the job.

"We had jobs to do, and there was still a bunch

by Tech. Sgt. Lisa M. Zunzanyika

Finance officer Capt. Jonathan Theard *lost many top noncommissioned officers to deployments. So unseasoned troops had to fill in doing often tough jobs. "But it was a big boost for our Airmen," he said. "They did more for themselves, without supervisors being there for guidance."*

of work to finish. So they did the work."

Another big stressor results from the Air Force's desire to deploy experienced troops. That can be good and bad, said Capt. Jonathan Theard, a financial services officer and flight commander with the 1st Comptroller Squadron, Langley Air Force Base, Va.

"What helps down range, can hamper you at home," said the captain from Alexandria, La. "Because that forces junior folks to have to step up, do more work and meet new challenges."

Senior Airman Judy Montesdeoca, a supply troop, *said working more when co-workers deployed wasn't a big deal. Plus, people did little things for each other to provide relief. "We were pretty quick about getting our job done," she said. And a pat on the back was all the motivation it took.*

by Master Sgt. Lance Cheung

Meeting the challenges

That can have its drawbacks at a base like Langley, home of the 1st Fighter Wing. With the experience base gone, many supervisors are not around to provide guidance at the busy finance office and training goes onto the back burner.

Down the hall at the finance office, Staff Sgt. Vereity Whitehorn, noncommissioned officer in charge of the separations and retirement section, said the knowledge base also suffers when the "corporate memory" deploys. This causes slowdowns in customer service because green troops must spend more time dealing with problems they've not handled before. But the sergeant, from Austin, Texas, said the younger troops recovered quickly.

"For the first month or so [after the deployment], we worked longer hours," she said. But then everyone pulled together after they figured out who was best suited for each job.

"Then we adjusted very well," she said. "We adapted and did the job."

Colonel Bradley said it takes constant fine-tuning of processes to ease workloads. And it takes clear direction from base and Air Force leaders to guide in decision making and prioritizing. But it's up to the workers themselves to find solutions to problems. The younger troops — the ones handling the biggest workload — seem to adapt best, he said. They're more imaginative when meeting challenges.

"They find creative solutions to problems," said the colonel from Camp Hill, Pa. "This helps mitigate the high operations tempo with fewer people."

However, older workers are just as adept. Mr. Young ended up doing every job in his work section. Along the way he streamlined the process in place to handle borrowed vehicle pickups.

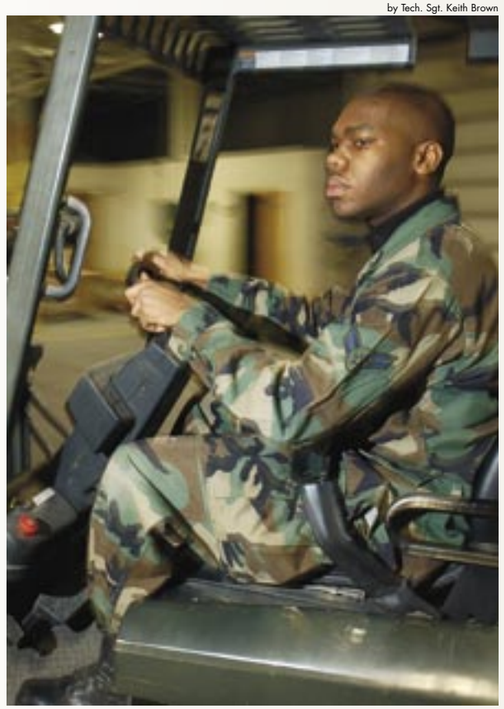
"Yeah, it's frustrating. But work doesn't go away. So you find ways to do it," Mr. Young said.

Despite the hardships, troops find ways to get the job done, said Master Sgt. Nancy Morin, also of Elmendorf's logistics readiness squadron. The superintendent of the travel center said her troops do the job because they know it's important. They know customers depend on them, at home and at the forward base of the war on terrorism. There's no difference, she said.

by Tech. Sgt. Keith Brown

Making quick decisions at the lowest level *are vital for customer service when co-workers deploy, Master Sgt. Nancy Morin [above] said, "We don't have time to do research." Airman 1st Class Grady Miller [below] didn't see the extra work as stressful, just as more responsibility. Unit leaders provided the best working environment possible. "Basically they took good care of us," he said.*

by Tech. Sgt. Keith Brown



"We don't have the option of not doing our work, or of turning customers away," said Sergeant Morin, of Fort Lauderdale, Fla. "We have to handle the workload. And being able to do that sometimes takes reaching deep within ourselves."

Surprisingly, getting that kind of dedication from troops takes very little effort, she said. Most Airmen know they're important to their mission and they must finish their tasks. To do that, most only need the simplest form of positive reinforcement.

"Most people are satisfied with just a pat on the back — a simple thank you," she said.

Airman Montesdeoca agrees. A little recognition for a job well done is all the motivation she needs to keep pressing. Like thousands of Airmen, she's worked long hours at home to support deployed troops. While downrange, she learned to depend on help from home. Now people depend on her. That realization is motivation enough.

"I just put myself in their shoes," she said. "The people downrange need us. And that's enough incentive to keep me going."

To keep focused on her task, she avoids things that distract her. She just concentrates on getting the job done, no matter how long it takes. And with no signs of the work tempo easing up any time soon, she can look forward to more.

But she has the energy and desire to do her part. She's not alone.